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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: MEDIA REACTION, FEBRUARY 7-13

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: The reported closure of Manas Airbase in neighboring Kyrgyzstan continues to make news in Kazakhstan, spurring a number of stories about regional politics and the announcement of a Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) Rapid Response Force. Both the closure decision and the CSTO Rapid Reaction Force were presented largely as a victory for Russia over the United States. Meanwhile, as Kazakhstan instituted a devaluation of the national currency and a government buyout of two major private banks, the economic crisis is primarily being covered from a local perspective, with very little reference to the United States. END SUMMARY

ADVANTAGE RUSSIA

¶2. (U) Pro-government, Russian-language "Liter" announced that last week was very successful for Russia, as "Russian politicians managed to take Kyrgyzstan away from the Americans." Even though "Russia tried to make it look like an independent decision by Kyrgyzstan... politicians in Moscow have started talking about the establishment of a Russian base in place of the American one." In a recent article, "Liter" slightly revised its appraisal by stating that the base closure came "under pressure from Russia and Kazakhstan" and Russia and Kazakhstan are now taking control over Central Asia, demonstrating to America who is the master in the region."

¶3. (U) Pro-government, Kazakh-language "Aikyn" quotes political scientist Murat Laumulin as saying that due to President Obama's commitments to Afghanistan, the United States will need more bases, but that any future bases in the region "will be decided between the United States and Russia. Russia is fighting to control U.S. activities in the region." Laumulin thinks that it is "too late" for a U.S. base in Kazakhstan, due to Kazakhstan's other commitments.

COUNTERWEIGHT

¶4. (U) "Liter" sees the establishment of a CSTO Rapid Reaction Force, "modeled after NATO," as necessary to respond to threats set in motion by "U.S. plans to intensify its anti-terrorist campaign in Afghanistan." "The Pentagon... has a sorrowful war experience in Iraq that caused a huge flow of refugees," and speculated that similar refugee flows from Afghanistan could destabilize Central Asia. The force could also fight drug trafficking. "The United States didn't take decisive measures to decrease the opium crop, but Moscow is in a hurry to take care of this."

15. (U) Independent Russian-language "Delovaya Nedelya" describes the Rapid Reaction Force decision as "bringing back the ghost of the Warsaw Pact to compete with NATO." It quotes unnamed Russian diplomats as saying that the purpose of the force is to "prevent post-Soviet republics from deepening relations with NATO," and wonders why Kazakhstan, with its lauded "multi-vector policy" joined the force. "Kyrgyzstan, due to its poverty, changes its foreign policy convictions depending on who gives the most. But why do we need this?"

ALL POLITICS ARE LOCAL

16. (U) The recent tenge devaluation and the government's entrance into the private banking sector have been almost completely reported in Kazakhstani terms, with only passing mentions of the international situation. The devaluation has been described in one of two ways. Pro-government, Russian-language "Express K" suggests, "By devaluating the tenge, the government did what it was supposed to do, breathing financial oxygen into the export-oriented sectors of the national economy." However, pro-government, Russian-language "Central Asia Monitor" complained, "The devaluation is putting the load of the crisis on the shoulders of ordinary people. It is pulling money out of the pockets of workers and pensioners. It is absurd."

17. (U) The government's move to take controlling financial stakes in two major private banks is seen as a power struggle between the government and the former chairman of one of the banks in question, Mukhtar Ablyazov of BTA. "Liter" quotes political observer Dosym Satpayev as saying that "the conflict between Mukhtar Ablyazov and the state is an echo of a more global process in which property is being redistributed to states." Opposition "Respublika" published a

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statement by Ablyazov that the takeover is "the result of constant and persistent government attempts to take BTA Bank using 'ambiguous methods.'" Other than Satpayev's comment above, there has been little attempt to place the government's actions in an international context.

HOAGLAND